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Racial Equality, Slavery, and Colonial Secession during the Constituent Assembly

DAVID GEGGUS

The colonial question in the French Revolution involved three broad issues: self-government for France’s overseas possessions, civil rights for their free colored populations, and the abolition of the slave trade and slavery itself. This article is primarily concerned with the pursuit in France of racial equality and slave emancipation, but it is difficult to understand that effort without reference to developments in the colonies, as well as to the contemporary debate about the limits of metropolitan control and the threat of white secessionism within the empire. Indeed, one of the chief interests of the colonial question lies in the interaction of its three component issues and the complex counterpoint that developed between events in Europe and the Caribbean.

Until recently, the colonial question has received remarkably little attention from scholars of the French Revolution. As Mitchell Garrett observed in 1916, historians have been less interested in French attitudes toward the colonies during the revolutionary period than in the colonies themselves. The abolition of slavery in 1794, surely one of the most radical acts of the entire revolution, gets no mention in the classic studies of Jules Michelet, Jean Jaurès, Albert Mathiez, and Albert Soboul, nor in the recent histories of George Rudé, D. M. G. Sutherland, and Simon Schama. Matters of empire, race, and slavery fail to appear in the documentary collections of J. M. Roberts and John Hardman, or in such different works as those of Peter Kropotkin, Pierre Gaxotte, and (barring a misleading half-sentence) Alexis de Tocqueville. Even

1 The distant Indian Ocean colonies of Île de France and Bourbon were less affected by the revolution than were the West Indian islands, and they had little impact on revolutionary politics. Of the Caribbean colonies, Saint Domingue was by far the most important economically and as a foyer of revolution.


the wide-ranging surveys of Jacques Godechot and Robert R. Palmer accord the briefest of mentions to France’s colonies.5

This neglect is surprising in view of the importance to ancien régime France of its overseas possessions. The expansion of French foreign trade in the eighteenth century was more rapid than that of Great Britain, and it was fueled largely by the Caribbean colonies of Martinique, Guadeloupe, and, most important, Saint Domingue (modern Haiti). By the late 1780s, they produced about half the Western world’s sugar and coffee, and three-quarters of this produce was reexported from France, earning vital foreign exchange. Perhaps more than a million of the French depended on colonial commerce for employment in what was the most dynamic and advanced sector of the French economy. The demise of the Atlantic coast ports during the revolution was in part a product of colonial problems, and Caribbean developments similarly contributed to la vie chère on the streets of Paris, where sugar riots broke out in 1792.6

The neglect of colonial affairs in French revolutionary historiography is also surprising because of the significance of the issues raised by the colonial question. The world’s first examples of colonial representation in a metropolitan assembly, of racial equality in an American colony, of wholesale emancipation in a major slaveholding society, and of the exportation of these policies as weapons of war all date from the years 1789–1794. In the political rhetoric of the mother country, slavery was merely a metaphor,7 but it was a grim reality in the colonies of the Caribbean and Indian Ocean. The emancipation decree of February 4, 1794 (16 Pluviose Year II), legally freed some 700,000 people, without compensating owners for the 1,000 million livres tournois in capital investment they represented.8

It is true that the French themselves preferred at the time to avoid the embarrassing problems posed by the colonies. Colonial autonomy, racial equality, abolition of the slave trade, and slave emancipation were grave threats to French prosperity, threats that the Declaration of the Rights of Man appeared rashly to promote. The colonial question thus tested the universalist claims of the French revolutionaries, and, according to Jaurès, it sapped the self-respect of the revolutionary bourgeoisie, forced into a painful confrontation of principle and interest. Foreshadowing the imperial crises of the present century, it is for Aimé Césaire the crucial question of the revolution.9 Its neglect by historians of France is therefore all the more surprising.

7 In William Doyle, The Oxford History of the French Revolution (Oxford, 1989), four of the ten indexed entries under “slavery” refer to metaphorical usage.
8 Published population statistics are very unreliable; they are investigated in David Geggus, “The Major Port Towns of Saint Domingue in the Late Eighteenth Century,” in Franklin Knight and Peggy Liss, eds., Atlantic Port Cities: Economy, Culture, and Society, forthcoming. Newly arrived African adults sold in Saint Domingue for close to 2,000 livres tournois in 1789. Locally born and skilled slaves could be worth considerably more, but children and the aged were less valued, and prices were somewhat lower in the other colonies.
Yves Bénol has suggested that this lack of attention may be partly attributable to the imperialist sensibilities of early writers, who preferred to overlook the struggles of the colonized. Their doing so influenced later historians, who have unwittingly absorbed their definition of the revolution's agenda. Whether or not this is so, at issue here are perceptions of the meaning and boundaries of the French Revolution.

**Dating back to Jean Bodin, antislavery ideas had a long history in France but remained at the end of the ancien régime little more than a superficial embellishment of Enlightenment thought.** The inhumanity of slavery had been condemned by Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, and contributors to the Encyclopédie, although with varying degrees of ambiguity. Even those like Denis Diderot and Louis-Sébastien Mercier, who called for violent self-liberation, showed no sustained commitment. Although the Physiocrats had attacked slavery's economic utility incidentally, their arguments made little headway against an institution so vital to the expansion of French commerce. The presence of slaves in France was exploited frivolously in parlementaire battles with the crown at the same time that explicitly racist attitudes became more prominent in scientific and government circles.

Despite such obstacles, a new practical antislavery concern emerged in the 1780s with the publication of concrete schemes for gradual abolition by the marquis de Condorcet and by the abbé Raynal, in his best-selling Histoire des deux Indes. Jacques Necker suggested an Anglo-French initiative to abolish the slave trade. Lafayette sponsored a secret emancipation experiment on a plantation in Guiana. Also in secret, the colonial minister de Castries pondered schemes for reforming and eventually abolishing slavery. In February 1788, Jacques-Pierre Brissot founded the elite Société des Amis des Noirs, which called for the ending of the slave trade and the eventual and gradual, but uncompensated, abolition of slavery. Unlike Britain, however, France never developed a popular abolitionist movement.

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13 Bénol, Révolution, 21–41; Gabriel Debien, Les esclaves aux Antilles françaises aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles (Basse-Terre, 1974), 488–90.
14 Jacques-Pierre Brissot, Discours sur la nécessité d'établir à Paris une société pour concourir... à l'abolition de la traite et de l'esclavage des Nègres (Paris, 1788). For lack of documentation, the Société has been the subject only of sporadic, article-length studies; most recently Françoise Thésée, "Autour de la Société des Amis des Noirs," Présence africaine, 125 (1983): 3–82. However, the appearance of the Société's procès-verbaux in the 1982 sale of the Brissot de Warville papers is encouraging for future research. For an incisive sketch of the group's deficiencies, see David Brion Davis, The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution (Ithaca, N.Y., 1975), 95–100.
15 Seymour Drescher argues that a mass base was vital to the British antislavery movement, although in France abolitionism eventually triumphed in the nineteenth century without gaining...
Nearly fifty of the 520 surviving general cahiers expressed hostility to slavery or the slave trade, although many of these also cautiously requested a compromise between “political interest” and “the sacred rights of humanity [or, liberty].” In his long opening speech to the Estates General in 1789, the king’s minister Necker also enjoined the deputies to consider the plight of black slaves. And, in a remarkable pamphlet published that same year, Brissot argued that the deputies owed “as much to [their] fellow citizens of the colonies as to those of Europe, as much to black Frenchmen as to white.”

The very first question on which the united three Orders had to vote in 1789 was the admission of illegally elected white representatives from the West Indies. After some delay, colonial representation was voted by acclamation. The one deputy who argued that colonies were not part of the patrie was quickly silenced. To the planters’ discomfort, however, these discussions enabled some prominent deputies, notably Mirabeau and La Rochefoucauld, to bring up the issues of slavery and racial equality. During the early summer of 1789, the colonial question did seem to be part of the revolutionary agenda.

Yet the Amis des Noirs were to meet complete failure in the Constituent Assembly. With hindsight, this looks like a foregone conclusion, but some contemporaries were optimistic. It seemed to the abolitionist Thomas Clarkson, arriving in Paris in early August 1789, that the Assembly might abolish the slave trade by acclamation. With Lafayette’s prestige and Mirabeau’s reputation as an orator at their respective apogees, Clarkson doubtless hoped for another emotional upsurge such as had produced the whirlwind abolition of serfdom and feudal rights on August 4. Indeed, slavery was eventually abolished in just this fashion in February 1794. It was more significant, however, that during the night of August 4 La Rochefoucauld had brought up the question of slavery without any success. And, even earlier, members of the Constituent Assembly began to display the impatience with anticolonial speakers that was soon to become typical. Even so, as the Assembly prepared the Declaration of the Rights of Man, planters in Paris were sufficiently alarmed to form a pressure group to defend their interests. It became known as the Club Massiac.

On the basis of the fear expressed in colonial correspondence sent from Paris,
Yves Bénot has suggested that the antislavery cause perhaps missed a promising opportunity in mid-1789.22 Even seven months later, by which time the pro-colonial lobby had marshaled formidable forces against its opponents, the centrist deputy Regnauld of Saint-Jean-d'Angély feared that the Assembly might still be carried away by emotive eloquence. The slave trade was an issue on which most deputies, he thought, had feelings rather than an opinion. Others agreed.23 By the beginning of 1790, when it was clear that the antislavery cause had lost much ground, Mirabeau, after personally taking soundings, apparently still reckoned that three hundred deputies would support abolition of the slave trade unconditionally and that another five hundred would do so if Britain agreed to abolish its slave trade.24

Thomas Clarkson, who then believed the British trade would soon be ended, considered the French slave trade a more vulnerable target.25 Smaller and less efficient than its British counterpart, it received annually 2 million livres in subsidies from the now bankrupt government. French slave merchants covertly used the services of British shipowners and brokers, and their export cargoes consisted largely of foreign goods. French planters also purchased many of their slaves from foreign contraband traders. Hence it could be claimed that banning the importation of slaves into France's colonies was not just a moral issue but was in the national interest and would hurt foreigners more than the French. (This tactic was used in Parliament to bring about the end of the British slave trade in 1806–1807.26) The Constituent Assembly, however, refused even to hear such arguments. No abolitionists were elected to its Colonial Committee, and, on March 8, 1790, it passed a decree granting the colonies internal legislative autonomy. With a fastidious use of euphemism, it gave assurance that the mother country would respect “local customs,” protect “colonial property,” and would not “innovate in any branch of colonial trade.” The decree was hurriedly approved without discussion, and the antislavery supporters who endeavored to speak were shouted down. Most newspapers welcomed the outcome.27

The colonial deputies subsequently boasted to their constituents that they had suggested almost every clause in the March 8 decree.28 This ascendancy of the colonial faction resulted from a combination of ingredients. First, French mercantile interests and the Club Massiac, burying their differences over commercial regulation, proved especially adept at lobbying deputies, publishing propaganda, and piling up petitions and addresses from the port cities, which

22 Bénot, Révolution française, 107–08.
25 Thésee, “Amis des Noirs,” 35–36, 79–82. Abolition had been under consideration by the British Parliament since 1788, and a bill eventually passed the House of Commons, though not the Lords, in 1792.
28 Affiches américaines, Feuille du Cap-François, 56 (July 14, 1790): 1.
claimed that the nation’s prosperity was at stake. Suspected of being in league with the British, the Amis des Noirs was clearly on the defensive by January 1790 in the battle for public opinion. Colonialist pressure forced Olympe de Gouges’s play, *L’Esclavage des Nègres*, from the theater and then halted publication of Antoine Bonnemain’s *Régénération des colonies*. Although the Atlantic ports were not well integrated into the French economy, they (and consequently the slave societies they serviced) represented what was most modern and dynamic in the ancien régime. Serfdom and slavery were, therefore, not seen in the same light. The support of the wealthy seaports appeared crucial to the future of the revolution. Its safety, finances, and unity should come first, claimed Antoine-Pierre Barnave, the liberal democratic leader and spokesman of the Colonial Committee.

To criticize the colonial status quo thus came to seem unpatriotic, and the March 8 decree actually made it a crime to incite unrest in the colonies. The stakes were raised this high because the debate was never focused narrowly on the slave trade alone. Even though the Amis des Noirs periodically asserted that the slaves were not yet “ready” for freedom, their writings made clear that abolition of the slave trade was to be just the first stage in the Société’s attack on slavery. As a result, Barnave and the colonial deputies accused the antislavery lobby, unfairly, of being opposed to colonization in general.

Far more serious, the imperial tie also seemed endangered by the white settlers themselves and by the slaves. From early in the revolution, Saint Domingue’s deputies claimed their colony to be an ally, not a dependent, of France, a position rooted in the island’s past. Its articulation became especially strident when the revolution appeared to threaten the colonial system. In the winter of 1789, the colonial deputies hinted openly that France needed its colonies more than the colonies needed France, and that if their wants were not met, secession might follow. Substance was lent to these threats by the overthrow of the Old Regime administration in the West Indies and the


31 AP, 12: 68–69.


colonists’ establishment of their own assemblies, developments that finally forced the Constituent Assembly to pay attention to colonial matters.

Autonomist movements in the Caribbean were further spurred by the fear of slave rebellion. Reports reached Paris in December 1789 of a brief slave revolt in Martinique and of unspecified disorders on plantations in Saint Domingue, supposedly provoked by news from France. Such reports were greatly exaggerated and, coinciding as they did with Abbé Henri Grégoire’s ill-timed call for a “general insurrection” against tyranny, they fed merchants’ and planters’ efforts to depict abolitionists as short-sighted, possibly criminal, fanatics. The mood of the Constituent Assembly changed considerably. Barnave was thus able to introduce the March 8 decree as an indispensable measure for reassuring the colonists and preserving the colonies.

In this manner, the slave trade and slavery became taboo subjects that the Constituent and Legislative assemblies simply refused to discuss. The demand for reform proved far weaker than even the cahiers had suggested. In May 1791, the Assembly passed a constitutional decree that explicitly guaranteed the slave regime against metropolitan interference. Robespierre objected violently, uttering his famous words, “Perish the colonies!” He also observed, less memorably, in the same speech, “The conservation of your colonies is an important matter.” The cause of his outburst was not the institution of slavery but concern for the domestic impact of a proposal to use the word “slave” in the decree (instead of “unfree person”). Except for future dramatic developments in the Caribbean, probably little more would have been heard of these issues. The slave trade was not abolished during the revolution; it reached its peak during the years 1789–1791.

The Constituent Assembly sought to avoid the question of racial equality as well, but in a more devious manner and with frank embarrassment. In contrast to the antislavery debate, the cause of the gens de couleur libres—the free colored middle class of the colonies—was all but unknown in France. Numbering forty thousand or so in the Caribbean, they were a diverse group. Most were of mixed

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36 From August onward, colonists in Paris were writing home that the Amis des Noirs might try to foment a slave revolt. Colonial radicals in Saint Domingue used such fears to mobilize support and undermine the administration: Peiner to La Luzerne, October 24, and November 12, 1789, Archives Nationales, Paris (hereafter, AN), cols. C9/162 and C9/163; Louis François Roger Armand Gatereau, Histoire des troubles de Saint-Domingue (Paris, 1792), 12–14.

37 Patriote français, 117 (December 3, 1789), 133 (December 24, 1789), 144 (December 30, 1789); AP, 26: 60.

38 “Yes, the cry of liberty rings out in two Worlds; it needs only an Othello, a Padrejean, to awaken in the soul of the Negroes a sense of their inalienable rights”; Grégoire, Mémoire en faveur des gens de couleur, 35–36. Padrejean had led a slave revolt in seventeenth-century Saint Domingue.


40 Only seven deputies had opposed the March 8 decree. Plans for slave emancipation were put to the assemblies by two obscure deputies named Viefville des Essarts (in May 1791) and Blanc-Gilli (in December 1791). Neither was discussed.

41 AP, 26: 60.

42 Brissot’s sense of urgency regarding the trade was not misplaced. In 1789, eighty-three slave ships sailed from Nantes and Bordeaux alone, and in 1790 more than forty thousand Africans were sold just in Saint Domingue; Jean Mettas, Répertoire des expéditions négrières, eds. Serge Daget and Michelle Daget, 2 vols. (Paris, 1978, 1984); Affiches américaines (1790), port statistics.
racial descent, and they included wealthy, well-educated, slaveholding families in addition to recently freed slaves. All were subject to humiliating, racist restrictions. According to colonists and colonial officials, the stability of the slave regime demanded that all descendants of slaves be consigned in perpetuity to a dishonored intermediary class. In 1778, mixed marriages and immigration by non-whites were banned even in France, where there lived several thousand non-whites, chiefly in Paris and the Atlantic ports. During the twenty years prior to the revolution, however, government officials began cautiously to discuss ameliorating the position of those in the colonies who were wealthiest and furthest removed from black ancestry. The Encyclopédie included a favorable article on mulâtres, which was echoed in early pamphlets of Brissot, the cahier of the Paris Third Estate, and some early altercations in the National Assembly. Even so, during the first years of the revolution, the French public still sometimes confused slaves and free coloreds.

Nevertheless, it was the race question that was to prove the most prominent of colonial issues during the Constituent Assembly. Free colored activists in both Paris and Saint Domingue brought their cause to public notice in the fall of 1789, and, taken up by Brissot and Grégoire, it thereafter became the main campaign of the Amis des Noirs. Much remains unclear about the genesis of this alliance and the evolution of free colored demands. Particularly uncertain is the importance attached in the debate to racial intermixture (specifically, to white ancestry). Since blacks were only a minority of free non-whites, in contemporary parlance they were often subsumed within the ambiguous term “people of color.” However, phenotypical distinctions were extremely important in the colonies, where they formed the basis of a racial hierarchy and tended in addition to coincide with differences in wealth, literacy, and genealogical distance from slavery. Juxtaposing questions of race and class, these internal divisions within the free colored sector merit much more research.

The early political activities of these non-whites reflected a clash between


45 Debbasch, Couleur, 144–66, is the most detailed study. The account in Debien, Les colons, 153–65, probably overrates the influence of the Amis des Noirs and Julien Raimond but seems the more accurate as regards chronology. Each relied on different copies of the Club Massiac’s papers.


47 Highlighted by some right-wing historians, they are generally ignored by those on the left. During the revolutionary era in the Caribbean, free blacks often aligned themselves either with whites or slaves rather than other free coloreds; Marcat to Brissot, April 30, 1791, AN, Dxxv 78/771; Geggus, Slavery, War and Revolution, 325–26, 330; David Geggus, “The French and Haitian Revolutions and Resistance to Slavery in the Americas,” Revue française d’histoire d’Outre-Mer, 282–83 (1989):109–11.
traditional colonial values and the new ideology of equal rights. The first pamphlet written by a free colored appears to be exclusively a plea for fellow “mixed bloods.”

48 *Précis des gémissements des sang-mêlés dans les colonies françaises, par J. M. C. Américain, Sang-mêlé* (Paris, 1789), 7, 9, 10, 13. It does call in passing for the implementation of the defunct Code Noir of 1685, which had accorded equal status to all freemen, irrespective of color, but the author’s other comments belie this suggestion.

49 Mulattoes were persons of black/white parentage; quadroons, of white/mulatto parentage.

50 Césaire, *Toussaint*, 56; and Debbasch, *Couleur*, 151, showed a radical change in Raimond’s proposals between August 26 and 28, but their accounts are clearly confused. To judge from Debien’s earlier study (*Les colons*, 158), they seem to have been misled by a false rumor spread by a colonist. On Raimond’s background, see John Garrigus, “The Free Colored Elite of Pre-Revolutionary Saint Domingue: The Case of Julien Raimond,” in D. Barry Gaspar and Gad Heuman, eds., *Brown Power in the Caribbean*, forthcoming.

51 Not the brilliant lawyer of legend, Ogé was an unsuccessful merchant from Saint Domingue then pursuing a lawsuit in Paris. When later interrogated in the colony, he commented that “he had never been friendly with any free blacks and . . . he scarcely knew any”; interrogation of Ogé, AN, Dxxv, 58/574.


55 *AP*, 10: 329–34, annex to session of November 28. Apparently not presented to the Constituent, the address was published in the next day’s *Moniteur universel*. Two weeks before, the
claimed fully to represent the colony already and who wished to ridicule their rivals’ demands. But the document probably was not a forgery, as has been claimed. Its authenticity was not challenged at the time, and Brissot in the *Patriote français* suddenly stopped using “free black” as a synonym for “free colored.” The breach was nevertheless of short duration. Although a sense of separate identity had suggested separate strategies to these different factions, they were visibly cooperating by early 1790, brought together by the new ideology of equal rights and the increasing intransigence of the colonists.

It is nonetheless striking that the free coloreds’ white allies continued to focus on white ancestry as an important attribute of the free coloreds. Although Grégoire did support the cause of free blacks, he almost always used the terms “mixed bloods,” “mulattoes,” and “people of color” in his advocacy, unlike Brissot, who frequently referred to “free blacks.” The concern with free coloreds as “descendants of Europeans” is explicit in the writings of the abbé de Cournand, another Ami des Noirs and early champion of colonial non-whites. He called for full equality for colored landowners who were two generations removed from slavery and, like Grégoire, for freedom at birth for slaves of mixed racial descent. Even in 1791, the Amis des Noirs’ addresses, while asserting the equality of all free non-whites, described them as “mulatto Frenchmen.” A similar tendency is evident in the addresses of the Jacobin Clubs.

Their choice of language was surely not accidental. Even though there was probably genuine misunderstanding about the true number of free blacks in the colonies, their activities in Paris meant they could not be ignored. Some reformers perhaps were willing to settle for a shift in the line of demarcation rather than the abolition of racial discrimination. Most likely, they thought that a discourse that stressed the mixed heritage of the *gens de couleur* had the best

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Société had denied any prejudice toward free blacks and proposed to defend itself in the press against the charge: *procès-verbal*, November 14, 1789, AN, Dxxv 111.


57 The change occurred between numbers 110 (November 26, 1789) and 117 (December 3, 1789). Compare Grégoire, *Mémoire en faveur*, 25; AP, 10: 333.

58 In the summer of 1789, a minority of colonists in Saint Domingue and Paris had shown themselves favorable in some degree to the free coloreds’ aspirations, and this doubtless had encouraged hopes for an accommodation; Claude Milscnt, *Du régime colonial* (Paris, 1792), 5; Garran Coulon, *Rapport*, 1: 106, 2: 3–8; Debien, *Les colons*, 156–69.

59 Compare Brissot’s *Lettre à MM. les députés et Patriote français*, 65 (October 9, 1789) onward; and Grégoire’s *Mémoire en faveur* and *Lettre aux philanthropes sur... les réclamations des gens de couleur* (Paris, 1790). Only after some free blacks were enfranchised by the decree of May 15, 1789, did Grégoire begin using the term frequently: *Lettre aux citoyens de couleur, et nègres libres* (Paris, 1791), particularly p. 2, where he switches from the vocative case to refer to his past efforts on behalf of “mixed-bloods.” The contrast is all the more striking with his posthumous memoirs, in which he uses the phrases “free blacks and mulattoes” and “free blacks and mixed bloods”; Hippolyte Carnot, ed., *Mémoires de Grégoire*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1837), 1: 391–92.


62 In Saint Domingue, they constituted about one-third of free coloreds.
chance of overcoming opposition and persuading the French to think of colonial non-whites as their fellow citizens. With the position of Jews and non-whites in France left in legal limbo until September 1791, it was the question of free coloreds in the colonies that first tested the racial boundaries of the French Revolution.

Here again, as on the question of the slave trade, the Constituent Assembly ended with the status quo intact, and for much the same reasons. The issues were more subtle, however, and there developed a greater diversity of opinion. The campaign began well on October 22, 1789, when at the bar of the Assembly the delegates of the Société des Colons Américains received vague but encouraging words from the president of the session. In November, their demand for free colored representation in the Assembly was accepted by a narrow vote in its Credentials Committee, chaired by Grégoire. Yet, because of extraordinary obstruction, the committee’s report was never presented, and when Grégoire tried to speak he was shouted down. The proposed deputies could not prove that they had any representative standing, and the Constituent Assembly had already opposed such special interest representation in the case of the mercantile lobby. However, it was not these arguments but raw political power that denied the free coloreds a voice, first in the National Assembly, then in the colonial assemblies recognized by the decree of March 8.

Resting squarely on the Declaration of the Rights of Man, the civil rights of tax-paying, property-owning, non-whites seemed a much safer issue to the Amis des Noirs than did the slave trade. It involved none of the conflict between rights to liberty and property found in the case of human bondage. Yet, despite their insistence that the free colored question was separate from that of slavery, the Amis did not succeed in divorcing the two issues. Brissot incautiously wrote that free colored citizenship would prepare the way for eventual emancipation of the slaves; this link remained a constant theme in antislavery literature. It also seemed that free colored deputies would become allies in the fight against the slave trade. And free colored attitudes toward slavery (an unresearched topic) could be perplexingly ambivalent.

It is broadly true that non-white slaveowners generally acted according to their class interests during the struggles of the 1790s. Yet, in an early address to the Constituent Assembly, the Colons Américains went out of its way to condemn the institution of slavery. Astonishingly, Vincent Ogé made a speech to a stonily silent Club Massiac in September 1789, alluding to preparing for the end of slavery, that left him a marked man. And, as already seen, both free coloreds and white abolitionists linked free colored citizenship with the emancipation of...
slaves of mixed racial descent. Finally, although antislavery writers were at pains to argue that elevating the status of free non-whites would strengthen the slave regime (and act as a check on white secessionism), both Grégoire and Brissot also suggested that, if driven to desperation, free coloreds would join with the slaves (or secessionist whites) in open revolt.67

The colonists also agreed that the race and slavery questions could not be kept separate. In the Caribbean, colonists and officials had traditionally regarded racial prejudice and discrimination as necessary bulwarks of slavery. They supposedly helped convince blacks of their inherent inferiority and prevented the relatives of slaves gaining access to public office. This argument seldom appeared early in the revolution, however. Legerdemain was used instead. For example, in February 1790, the Paris Commune warmly received a deputation of non-whites but, after hearing arguments from both sides on the colonial question, passed on to other business.68 Similarly, Barnave’s Colonial Committee wanted the decision on free colored voting rights to be made by the colonial assemblies, but it dared not admit this. In defining the franchise, therefore, in the decree of March 8 and its accompanying instructions, it made deliberately ambiguous reference to “citizens” or “persons,” without mention of phenotype.69

When a debate was finally forced and Grégoire sought clarification, the session was hastily closed, with Barnave and others giving off-the-record assurance that the rights of free coloreds were not infringed.70 In the Caribbean, both white planters and royal administrators interpreted the decree according to colonial norms. Their view became the “official” one, and on October 12 Barnave added to another colonial decree (forced through without debate) a promise that the National Assembly would not legislate on the “status of persons” in the colonies.71

There are a few tantalizing signs that things could have turned out differently. Colonial opinion was by no means monolithic, and the race question interested merchants notably less than planters. Racial conflict assumed different proportions in different colonies, and even within the Club Massiac and in parts of Saint Domingue there was movement in 1789 toward cooperation between whites and free coloreds.72 Hence there was some basis for accommodation. The nature and causes of these divergent approaches merit further investigation, but most likely they were not very influential.73 In any event, a polarization of whites and free coloreds rapidly took place as the race and slavery issues became entwined. While free coloreds were being lynched in Saint Domingue and Martinique, the Constituent Assembly rallied solidly behind Barnave’s efforts not to alienate white colonial opinion. The Assembly’s concern to reassure colonists and to avert any movement toward secession was particularly explicit in the tormenting

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67 Patriote français, 117 (December 3, 1789); Grégoire, Mémoire en faveur, 33, 51; Grégoire, Lettre aux philanthropes, 14; Moniteur universel (February 16, 1790).
68 Debbasch, Couleur, 169-72.
70 Grégoire, Lettre aux philanthropes, 1–2.
71 See above, note 58.
72 Gatereau, Histoire, 19–21; Debbasch, Couleur, 169–72.
colonial debate of May 1791, which led to the constitutional guarantee of inviolability for the slave regime but also to a reversal on the race issue. By May 1791, pro-colonial speakers faced a new degree of opposition on the floor of the Assembly, in its public galleries, and in the streets outside. During the previous six months, the political situation had changed noticeably, partly because of a short-lived rebellion in northern Saint Domingue led by an exasperated Vincent Ogé. News of Ogé's being tortured and broken on the wheel reached France early in the spring and helped bring home to the Constituent Assembly the implications of colonial self-government. Fighting between urban and rural whites in the Caribbean also encouraged a more interventionist policy toward the colonies. The Assembly dispatched troops and drew up plans to send out civil commissioners with extensive powers. Many deputies now saw concessions to the free coloreds not only as a means of atonement for the dishonest neglect of the past but as a way of strengthening France's loose grip on its colonial populations. The port of Bordeaux announced its support for the gens de couleur.

The political climate was also changing in France. Growing antipathy toward the aristocracy and dissatisfaction with the limitation of the franchise probably put in a more sympathetic light the free coloreds' case against the "aristocracy of the skin." At the very least, free colored rights provided a vehicle with which disgruntled Jacobins could attack the political status quo. Michael Kennedy's study of the Jacobin Clubs shows that support for the free coloreds grew in early 1791 more in response to Grégoire's advocacy than to events in Saint Domingue. Yet the provincial Jacobins' petitioning campaign was sparked directly by the Ogé affair and was apparently the work of Claude Milscent in Angers, a maverick liberal planter. Some historians see in this period an upswelling of popular support for the free coloreds' cause. However, the extent of public interest in colonial affairs during the revolution remains problematical. For example, the support of the provincial Jacobin Clubs and the Bordeaux merchants appears to have been somewhat fragile.

After four days of heated debate on the rights of free coloreds and the

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75 The rebellion remained a local affair, true to Debbasch's characterization of free colored politics as fractured and isolated. The parish where it occurred, however, appears to have been in early contact with the movement in Paris: petition of Grande Rivière free coloreds, November 11, 1789, Brissot Papers, Marcel Châtillon collection, Paris. Early in 1790, moreover, Ogé's elder brother had been killed leading free colored petitioners in the neighboring West Province: Verrier to Legrand, February 25, 1790, AN, Dxxv 72/718; interrogation of Ogé, AN, Dxxv, 58/574.
77 AP, 25: 737, 26: 357–60; Lettres importantes relatives à la question des citoyens de couleur (Paris, 1791), 1–5; Lettres des diverses sociétés, 6–7.
78 Blackburn, Overthrow, 185–88.
79 Michael Kennedy, The Jacobin Clubs in the French Revolution (Princeton, N.J., 1982), 204–09; see Claude Milscent, Sur les troubles de Saint-Domingue (Paris, 1792); and Lettres des diverses Sociétés. Like Ogé, Milscent was from the central mountains of the North Province.
81 Kennedy, Jacobin Clubs, 209; AP, 30: 123.
"necessity" of racial discrimination, a compromise decree was passed on May 15, 1791. It enfranchised only non-whites born of free parents, not freedmen. It thus kept in existence an intermediary class, as the colonists wished, but one based on legal standing, not phenotype. Furthermore—a point often overlooked—it accorded only voting rights without touching discrimination in any other area. Still, the white colonists regarded the decree as a dangerous breach in the colonial system. Colonial deputies walked out of the Constituent Assembly. Planters in Saint Domingue spoke ever more loudly of secession, and the colony's governor wrote home that he could not enforce the decree. In Paris, a climate of political reaction set in following the flight of the king. Interaction between events in the colonies and metropole accelerated, but colonial policy continued to be fatally out of step with developments in the Caribbean. In a remarkable volte-face, Barnave managed to have the decree rescinded in the closing days of the Constituent Assembly, even as Jews, actors, and—a conciliatory gesture—non-whites in France had their civil rights recognized.

By then, frustrated free coloreds in Saint Domingue had already taken up arms and forced acceptance of their demands from recalcitrant planters. They were able to do this because in August 1791 there broke out in the colony's northern plain the largest slave revolt in the history of the Americas. Its origins are obscure, but the strengthening of counterrevolutionary currents in Europe and rumors associated with the suppression of the May 15 law seem to have been influential. Also, the prospect of secession probably aroused no enthusiasm in the slave quarters. The planters for their part commonly blamed the insurrection on the interference of abolitionists, free coloreds, or counterrevolutionaries. Whatever its causes, the Saint Domingue slave revolt decisively changed the colonial situation, first pushing white planters to take overt steps toward secession (1791), then bringing French legislators to concede full racial equality (1792) and eventually slave emancipation (1794).

In a sense, there are good grounds for neglecting colonial affairs in histories of the Constituent Assembly. In October 1791, slavery, the slave trade, and racial

82 Opponents of the free coloreds did not attack them in racist terms in the formal debate but rather argued for the utility of prejudice as a stabilizing force in slave society. The role of racist ideas is difficult to pin down, historians disagreeing as to the prevalence of "biological racism" in this period. This is partly because the then-influential theories of Buffon can be interpreted as either biological or environmental.

83 The number of beneficiaries would have been further limited by the probable need for the parents to have been legally married in order to prove the father's status. Even so, the oft-repeated statement that in Saint Domingue the decree affected only four hundred persons seems scarcely credible.

84 AP, 30: 118-19; Geggus, Slavery, War and Revolution, 51-52.

85 Slaveholding within France was also abolished at this time, but, like the status of non-whites in France, this had never been an issue. Even the colonial deputy Cocherel had suggested in November 1789 that all blacks should be free, so long as they stayed in France; AP, 10: 266.

86 The insurgents claimed to be defenders of the king, who was said to have passed an emancipation decree. This was to be a common feature of American slave rebellions for forty years; Geggus, "French and Haitian Revolutions," 119-21.

87 Geggus, Slavery, War and Revolution, 52-54.
discrimination in the colonies all remained juridically unchanged. Although the Assembly had admitted seventeen colonial representatives, it had recognized no deputies for the non-whites, who made up more than 90 percent of the colonies’ inhabitants. French overseas possessions had been placed outside the new constitution, and the colonies were left self-governing in internal matters, free to choose which aspects of the national regeneration they would adopt.

Nonetheless, Caribbean politics could not be kept out of the Constituent Assembly. By early 1791, the creation of civil commissioners and the dispatch of troops had begun to undermine the colonial autonomy granted the preceding year. Deputies had to grapple with issues that painfully opposed political principles and national prosperity. On the racial question, they reversed course several times and produced in May one of the great debates of the early revolution. These events alone should gain for colonial matters a more prominent place in the historiography of revolutionary France.

Also relevant to the question of the centrality of colonial affairs to the French Revolution is the relative importance of overseas and metropolitan influences in creating policy and shaping the colonial revolution. To what extent did colonial policy evolve out of developments in France, and to what degree was it generated by events in the colonies that may have been only tangentially related to France’s revolution? Where in this colonial question should one locate core and periphery? Here is perhaps the greatest challenge to the historian of the colonial revolution. The work of the distinguished West Indian Marxists C. L. R. James and, in particular, Aimé Césaire has done much to establish the colonial revolution as an autonomous force that helped to radicalize the French Revolution. Similar arguments have been presented by writers of the Haitian noiriste school and also by some European scholars on the right. Creole autonomism, free colored activism, and slave resistance certainly had complex pre-histories independent of the revolution in France, and, as noted above, the Constituent’s colonial legislation came largely as a response to events in the Caribbean.

The recent studies by Bénot and Robin Blackburn also support this viewpoint and achieve a new degree of sophistication in integrating metropolitan and colonial developments. But they additionally make a strong case, also within a Marxist framework, for giving renewed emphasis to idealist influences inside the French Revolution. Antislavery and anti-racism were politically weak forces, Bénot and Blackburn agree, but, together with the growth of French radicalism, they helped form the intellectual and emotional climate in which colonial policy was made, and they created political options that could be taken up as political calculations changed.

The evidence that Bénot, Blackburn, and James put forward of a growing

88 James, Black Jacobins, passim; Césaire, Toussaint, 21–22, 159, 308–09.
89 See, for example, Emmanuel C. Paul, Questions d’histoire (Port-au-Prince, 1956); Saint-Victor Jean-Baptiste, Haïti: Sa lutte pour l’émancipation (Paris, 1957); Erwin Rüsch, Die Revolution von Saint Domingue (Hamburg, 1930); J. Saintoyant, La colonisation française pendant la Révolution, 2 vols. (Paris, 1930).
90 Bénot, Révolution, 7–9, 18–20; Blackburn, Overthrow, 185–90, 195, 222–25, 230.
popular solidarity in France with colonial non-whites is suggestive but limited, and there seems some contradiction in Bénôt’s depiction of antislavery as possessing mass support yet remaining the cause of an enlightened handful of individuals. Nevertheless, in exploring the popular press, he has convincingly reconstructed the spread of antislavery sentiment beyond the elite Amis des Noirs and highlighted the roles of several neglected individuals whose interest in the colonies cannot be reduced to a pragmatic reaction to overseas events, though it did not always pre-date the revolution. Easily the most important of these was Léger-Félicité Sonthonax, the commissioner who unilaterally abolished slavery in Saint Domingue in 1793 and so precipitated the emancipation decree of 16 Pluviôse. Although his actions are best understood as a desperate response to a wartime emergency, they take on a new appearance when one realizes that as early as September 1790 Sonthonax was predicting the end of slavery, writing that “the time is not far off when a frizzy-haired African, with no recommendation beyond his good sense and virtue, will come and participate as a legislator in the bosom of our national assemblies.”

Perhaps the most important point that one can make regarding the force of antislavery ideas, however, is to note that the moral case against slavery and institutionalized racism was often conceded by their leading defenders. Both were unjust and irrational, they admitted, but unfortunately necessary for French prosperity and the preservation of order in the colonies. It is a measure of antislavery’s success that its opponents were often reduced to a defense based on pragmatism that later proved vulnerable to recalculations of self-interest.

Finally, it is important not to ignore the way in which the decrees of March 8 and October 12, 1790, and May 15 and September 24, 1791, reflected the changing political climate in Paris: the triumph of bourgeois liberalism, the subsequent radical challenge, and the political reaction of the summer of 1791. Jaurès and James have argued that the about-face on the race question facilitated the post-Varennes reaction, but on chronological grounds alone this would seem unlikely. All in all, while it is clearly fruitless to try to assign primacy to either French or overseas influences in creating colonial policy, the history of that policy cannot be treated in isolation from the development of the revolution in France.

Defining the French Revolution’s impact on the colonies is a more difficult task. Despite an abundant historiography, current research does not allow

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91 Bénôt, Révolution, 75, 86–87, 200–04, 217; Blackburn, Overthrow, 223; James, Black Jacobins, 75–77, 120, 139.
92 Bénôt, Révolution, 130; Robert Louis Stein, Léger-Félicité Sonthonax: The Lost Sentinel of the Republic (Rutherford, N.Y., 1985), 21. Exactly three years later in Saint Domingue, Sonthonax had African-born Jean-Baptiste Mars Belley elected deputy and sent to Paris to plead for general emancipation (see cover illustration). Ironically, he was one of the very few former slaveowners to sit in the Convention: AN, Section d’Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, Notariat, Saint-Domingue, reg. 1012, contract dated June 19, 1787.
94 Jaures, Histoire socialiste, 1: 574; James, Black Jacobins, 80–81. The king’s attempt to escape from Paris in June is known as the Flight to Varennes. To appease the alienated monarch, the Assembly thereafter clamped down on radicals and introduced several conservative reforms.
precise formulations, as Bénot observed, and his and Blackburn’s excellent studies are notably stronger on metropolitan than colonial events. This is not the place to review the whole colonial revolution, but a few points can be made. Although Césaire’s stress on the diversity of the revolutionary experience in the colonies is well founded, it does not entirely undercut those who argue for the French Revolution’s importance in shaping the colonial revolution. Many similarities existed between events in the different colonies, and the central issues were generally the same, even if differences in demographic balance and geographic size produced differing outcomes.

The question is fundamentally one of weighing the ideological influence of the French Revolution against its political influence. Did the revolution create new social and political aspirations in the colonies or merely weaken the institutions that traditionally had held them in check? “Merely” is perhaps an overly dismissive term to describe the disruption of the colonial administration and military that took place in the period 1789–1791. There is certainly, I would argue, a vast difference in scale between developments before and after 1789 in white autonomism, free colored activism, and slave resistance. Yet the specificity of the colonial revolution remains difficult to define, especially insofar as France and its empire were part of a broader Atlantic revolution.

French Caribbean whites behaved and spoke much like their compatriots in France, where the great majority had been born. The role of the principal law courts, the hatred of “administrative despotism,” the adoption of the tricolor cockade, the creation of municipalities and political clubs, the pursuit of representative government, all were similar in mother country and colonies, even if the seigneurial pretensions of some planter revolutionaries made them look as much like aristocrats in Robert R. Palmer’s broad definition as like the Patriots they usually claimed to be. Anne Pérotin-Dumon’s work on the Jacobins of the Windward Isles brings out their mimetism and fixation on the revolution in France. However, she also underlined the centrality of the race and slavery issues for these “Patriots in the Tropics” and showed how colonial values tempered their revolutionary zeal. Eighteenth-century attitudes to race require much more investigation, but, even though the difference in social setting was indeed enormous, the gap between France and its colonies was not necessarily so great. Just as metropolitan radicals were slow to take up the race and slavery issues, those in the West Indies were generally obliged to reconcile themselves, at least superficially, to the reforms of 1792 and 1794.

For many others, however, the end of white supremacy and slavery provided grounds for abandoning “la France régénérée.” The revolution thus reinforced

95 Bénot, Régolution, 138.
97 Geggus, Slavery, War and Revolution, 33–37; Palmer, Age of the Democratic Revolution.
latent desires for independence and freedom from restrictions on foreign trade, the other area in which colonial and metropolitan interests clashed head-on. Even so, it is remarkable that, while in the Caribbean the trade laws were openly flouted during the revolution, the planter lobby in France scarcely raised the commercial question at all, so anxious was it to secure the port city merchants as allies.

As for colonial secessionism, I have argued elsewhere that it was a weaker movement than appearances suggested and that, as in France, counterrevolutionary forces played an important role in the rejection of the mother country.99 The first colonists to break away from France were not the turbulent and ambitious “Americans” of Saint Domingue but the traditionalist planters of the Windward Isles, who rejected the French Republic in September 1792. While the colonial world had its own social and economic imperatives, historians of France’s revolution can find much that is familiar in the revolutionary experience of the French overseas. Much less is known about the free coloreds. Their rapid growth in population suggests that, revolution or not, sooner or later they would have become a potent political force. The French Revolution, however, gave them a public forum unavailable in the colonies and the Declaration of Rights seems to have had an immediate impact on their platform. When Ogé rebelled, moreover, he used as a rallying cry the decree of March 1790.

The relationship of the slave population to the French Revolution remains obscure because slaves had little opportunity to express their views in durable form. Césaire was wrong to connect the Martinique uprising of August 1789 to news of the Bastille’s fall; it was then still unknown. Nevertheless, other rumors, conflating abolitionism and royalist reforms, seem to have been important in mobilizing the rebels.100 These circulated in Saint Domingue late in 1789, along with talk of “the revolt of the white slaves [in France] who had killed their masters and taken possession of the land.” Most important, these rumors helped to instigate the great insurrection of 1791.101 Yet they were not confined to the French islands alone. One of the intriguing features of the period from 1789 to 1791 is the emergence of a new type of slave revolt, soon to become common, in which the rebels claimed to have been already freed.102 The evidence concerning the aims of the Saint Domingue rebels of 1791 is contradictory. However, the commitment of the slaves’ leaders to the overthrow of slavery was ambiguous and rarely expressed in idealistic terms. Leaders tended to adopt a conservative church-and-king rhetoric and express contempt for those they called “les

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99 Geggus, Slavery, War and Revolution, chap. 3.
101 Exactly how such rumors functioned, and their relative importance for leaders and masses, raises the intractable problem of the psychology of subordination, which is likely to remain insoluble; David Geggus, “The Causation of Slave Rebellions,” Indian Historical Review, 14 (1987–88), forthcoming.
102 Although a few earlier examples exist, the phenomenon fully emerged with the revolts or conspiracies in Martinique (1789), Tortola (1790), Dominica, Port Salut and the northern plain in Saint Domingue (1791). The last examples I am aware of come from Jamaica (1831) and Bourbon (1832).
citoyens,” which complicates considerably the question of their relationship to the French Revolution. Although Eugene Genovese has argued for a new “bourgeois-democratic” type of slave revolt developing under the revolution’s influence, I suggest that what is novel about slave resistance in this period most probably derived from the international antislavery movement and late ancien régime reformism.103

The interaction between events in Paris and the Caribbean during the closing months of the Constituent Assembly ensured the colonial question a much greater salience within revolutionary politics in the months to come. Curiously, the first news of the August uprising that reached France was regarded with considerable skepticism, and the concurrent reports of the white secessionist response (this time, real) often seemed just as threatening.104 Yet it was the slaves that rebelled in this last month of the Constituent Assembly who would bring not only racial equality and slave emancipation to the French empire but also colonial secession and, in 1804, its first independent state.

103 Eugene Genovese, From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World (Baton Rouge, La., 1979); Geggus, “French and Haitian Revolutions.”
104 Moniteur universel (November 1, 1791); Jacques-Pierre Brissot, Discours de J.-P. Brissot . . . sur les causes des troubles de Saint-Domingue (Paris, 1791), 4; Milscen, Sur les troubles, 3, 11–14.